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Mountain Climbers

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“And these are the arm loops, I guess.” Pop stands barefoot in the driveway, ensnared in something faintly resembling a climbing harness. His pasty, freckled legs protrude from beneath a crumpled pair of cotton shorts, which match the gravel beneath our feet. The so-called harness bites absurdly into Pop’s thighs and shoulder blades, forcing him to crouch and curse softly. I cringe, thinking of the pressures his genitalia must be enduring. The instructions for this obnoxious contraption have long been discarded. The brittle, black nylon is cinched into several burly-looking knots, which seem to have petrified after decades of storage in an apple box marked “Old Climbing Gear.” I remember toying with the bamboo ice axe as a child. The mammoth fleece parka, the stiff leather boots, the funny blue helmet. But this, this is a climbing harness?

Tomorrow Pop will forgo Zen meditation and I will skip church as father and son journey two hours up to Mt. Rainier National Park. Pop’s Nissan Frontier has yet to be loaded with two ragged backpacks capable of outfitting a small army of climbers bound for the Himalayas—around 1950. The truck has four-wheel drive, but in two years Pop has never ventured off-road. No matter, tomorrow’s drive entails an hour of familiar northbound Interstate 5 followed by eastbound Highway 12. Spiffy’s, a roadside diner known for generous slices of rhubarb pie, marks the turn-off. Another hour of pockmarked timberland brings us to our final destination: a quaint, A-frame cabin nestled against what locals refer to simply as “the mountain,” a million-year-old, 14,410 foot mound of volcanic rock and glacial ice. Here Rainier reigns as matriarch of the Cascades, crown trophy to aspiring mountaineers, giver and taker of life.

The ascent was Uncle Dan's idea, not surprisingly. One might say the Nelson family is in indebted to the mountain. It all started with Uncle Dan as a swarthy climbing guide in the late 1970s. Then there was Aunt Deb, an ornery, freezing snow camper who decided to indulge the bashful guide with conversation one moonlit night rather than shiver herself to sleep. And there were Mom's summers as a Paradise Lodge waitress, her wildflower hikes to lofty Camp Muir "on my lunch breaks." There was the summit storm that kept Pop from ascending, the night the bearded Guatemalan spent at the lodge as a result, and the two climbers who perished in an accident later that week. There were the five eggs he ordered for breakfast from a waitress who cocked an eyebrow at the amount of cholesterol this foreigner was proposing to consume. There was the hastily sketched smiling sunshine on Pop's meal check, an illustration that impressed the novice *alpinista* (but years later was admitted to have adorned all of Mom's receipts). "One time," she says, "I had a twenty dollar tip." There was the evening spent round the hearth in broken English, the letters pondering C.S. Lewis, and the knitted climbing socks mailed to Guatemala. Then there was the Christmas wedding in Tacoma's smallest church, and the honeymoon telemarking led by Uncle Dan (a misguided expedition that had Pop mumbling Spanish expletives to a couple of Rainier foothills conspiring to rob him of a ski). And ten months later, there was me.

Sunday morning. My mom and sisters leave for church with promises to have barbecued steak and homemade pesto ready at the cabin upon our return. I smile appreciatively and kiss each goodbye; Pop is vegetarian, and whispers something to Mom about Portobello mushrooms. Our packs are gaining weight by the hour. Yesterday evening, after rummaging through the apple box with pained expressions, we made a hasty foray to Portland's Recreational Equipment Inc. It's a classy outfitter with membership cards and dividends and smiling, unshaven employ-

ees in green vests, and a sense of progressivism that somehow makes shopping feel like community service.

Forty-dollar mechanical ascenders found their way into our basket like candy. Then, in a haze of merchandise, the basket underwent metamorphosis and we found ourselves pushing a laden cart up to the checkout counter. The scanning and bagging began. Patagonia socks, Petzl headlamps, and Therm-a-Rest collapsible foam pads. Rentals to augment Pop's vintage gear, including another ice axe and helmet, plastic alpine boots, crampons, and an updated frame pack. Carabiners by the dozen, a flashy Black Diamond harness (with all the loops and padding and buckles that harnesses ought to have), and color-coded nylon rope for "crevasse extrication," said Jim, our REI assistant. (I'm not entirely sure we can extricate ourselves from a snow drift, much less an icy void.) Gore-Tex liners, waterproof gators, emergency whistles, and a North Face vest nabbed from consignment. The receipt inched its way toward the floor.

Two credit cards were run, but to no avail. Bad expiration dates, apparently. Pop's eyebrows furrowed in consternation, and his lower lip began stroking his moustache in a familiar fashion. With promises of payback, I reached grudgingly for my own plastic dispensary. The debit card felt thick and reassuring after a sweltering summer of Coast Guard training in Yorktown, Virginia, where there's little to buy. Swipe. Beep. Scribble. "Have a nice day." The countertop trembled a little as the economy took a surge.

We're on the road, but it's getting dark. Strategically compressing our new gear has consumed much of the afternoon, and remaining daylight is quickly being devoured by a stop at Woodland's Shop For Less. We carefully deliberate over vanilla crisp PowerBars, string cheese, tangerine Clif bars with "caffeine burst," Gerber peach baby food (a "summit treat" for Pop), tapioca pudding cups, trail mix with peanuts, Gatorade, trail mix with chocolate but no peanuts,

Powerade, dried pineapple, Craisins, Wheat Thins, nectarines, apples, and bottled water. Our packs reach saturation level.

Twilight fades into black of night as we turn into the wooded cabin driveway. Uncle Dan and his Dartmouth climbing buddy, York, have been waiting with supper since early afternoon. They've come from New Hampshire; we live a hundred miles from the cabin. Handshakes and awkward bear hugs are exchanged. Guatemalans relish physical embraces. This makes Caucasians nervous. After piling our gear on the cabin porch, Uncle Dan asks if we picked up food. We nod proudly, and begin describing our wide selection of trail snacks. What about breakfast? Dinner? Are we going to cook anything? Pop and I exchange glances. Uncle Dan says he'll heat up the baked potatoes while we run our errand.

Pop and I scour the local corner store and decide on top ramen, but breakfast is still lacking. The cashier, a tired-looking Japanese woman, rings up our eight pouches of ramen with glazed eyes. Oriental spice and Manchurian beef drop into a paper sack with a crackle.

"Eight fifty-one." I stifle a gasp at the mark-up.

"Would you have any instant oatmeal?" asks Pop, with as much warmth as he can muster.

"No." Some cashiers can speak without altering their expression in the least. We depart with sack in hand, sort of tiptoeing, and cover another ten miles in search of oatmeal.

The pot roast is growing cold as we shuffle into the cabin, spouting apologies. I am famished. Pop serves himself a baked potato and a meaty stalk of poached broccoli. I slather A-1 over my roast and dig in. York seems quiet, a brilliant physicist who stares at his plate unless asked to pass the salt or elaborate on the weather. Uncle Dan asks everyone to tuck away

the last of the greenery. Pop accepts another stalk and launches into an update on the family business. York passes the salt.

The dinnerware is scraped, rinsed, and dried. We poke among the cabinets, trying to find logical nooks and crannies for mugs, spatulas, and pot lids. The cabin belongs to Alma, my grandpa's elderly house sitter who now lives in a Tacoma studio apartment. The mountain was just too remote for an old widow, they said. There is a complete videocassette collection of the adventures of Jacques Cousteau. A puzzle photo on the wall shows Alma in the prime of life, draped in white and flinging a wedding bouquet over her shoulder. Uncle Dan and York begin to yawn and ready their sleeping bags. Pop and I head for the porch to wrestle with our backpacks in the moonlight.

I clench a Mag-Lite between my lips, attempting to extract layers of thermal underwear I have decided to leave behind. I can taste the black steel digging into my teeth. Pop tries on his harness for the third time, still looking perplexed. I wedge a hole between some raingear and a pair of gloves, and force the pack to accept my bulging grub bag. Pop tweaks his rusty crampons for ten minutes, then shuffles up to the attic and turns in. I follow close behind. The wooden staircase groans with annoyance, and I can only make out dim, breathing shapes. I grope through the dark for my CD player and try to drift off. Now Paul comes back to bed complaining that I've taken his place. Oh well. *Cecilia, you're breaking my heart.*

Dawn. I feel someone gently nudging my shoulder, but I'm already awake. "What is it Pop?"

"I'm not feeling good. I slept about an hour last night. Didn't you hear York snoring?"

"No."

“Well, I think its nervousness or stress. Maybe the enzymes aren’t working. It’s been a long week and my stomach is tied in a knot. I’m sorry.”

“That’s okay.” I’m dumbfounded and more than a little frustrated, but I try not to let on. This would have been his second ascent, Uncle Dan’s 98th, and my first. We’ve been planning this trip since last spring. There were e-mails to Dartmouth, maps spread on the kitchen table. Each night in Yorktown I would iron my uniform and shut off the light thinking *I’m one day closer to climbing Rainier with Pop.*

“Will you still go?”

“Yeah Pop, don’t worry about it.” I hurriedly transfer gear between our packs, anticipating a climbing party of three instead of four. Memories begin springing to mind like so many yardsticks trying to measure Pop according to some make-believe Superhuman Dad scale. The New Year’s trip to Bend, Oregon, when he rented skis and bought a lift ticket, only to retreat to the lodge with hot chocolate and a book after a harrowing run down the bunny slope. The church climb on Mt. Adams when Pop opted to hunker down among some rock outcroppings called False Summit while we finished the ascent and snapped pictures of the shiny vistas. The way Pop turns green after a few turns on the Clark County Fair’s shimmering Yo-Yo.

But there are other memories. Memories of a dad who explains why Hemlock stands would eventually dominate a pristine evergreen forest as if describing the mystery of one hand clapping. The time we skinned and cooked the young pheasant that careened into the front grill of our truck. Those Saturdays on the Lewis River with a foldable rubber kayak brought in pieces from Guatemala. Pop cooking scrambled eggs with rice and ketchup and Star Trek for dinner while Mom was grocery shopping.

Neither of us finish the August ascent. Huddled in an ice tent at base camp that night, an exhausted climbing trio watches dark clouds obscure the summit. The air is thin, and now I have a headache and am glad not to be rest-stepping my way into airspace normally reserved for jetliners and wily flocks of migratory birds. A strapping twentysomething with the Forest Service asks to take our blood oxygen levels with a little handheld computer, part of a high altitude study. He nods vaguely at the readout. I feel somewhat like a goldfish snatched from a warm tank, made to die slowly in the cruel air.

By morning a rainstorm chases us back down the mountain. We scurry along slush-mud switchbacks that took hours to assault. We cross ice fields tinted red with rock flour, and step gingerly past new snow. Uncle Dan's Ray-Bans scan the ground like quiet radar, ever wary of crevasses. York huffs and pants, sweat dripping off his wind-chapped nose as he falls a hundred yards behind. We stop and wait, no longer commenting on the panoramic landscape, just eager to be moving again. Slowly the frozen world gives way to Indian paintbrush and stubby pines hunkered low against the wind.

The trail picks up again, wending its way through boulders and jumbled moraine and day hikers standing aside with reverent nods at our towering packs. Down below, the glinting hubcaps of Volkswagens jockey for parking outside the lodge. Then, a familiar face waiting on a bench hewn from old growth timber, a smooth slab of wood accustomed to woozy senior citizens. Pop's smile widens contagiously. Sheepish blue eyes sparkle under the gray sky. Dammit. I'm smiling too.